

JAPAN'S DECISION FOR WAR IN 1941: SOME ENDURING LESSONS

Jeffrey Record

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FOREWORD

Japan's decision to attack the United States in 1941 is widely regarded as irrational to the point of suicidal. How could Japan hope to survive a war with, much less defeat, an enemy possessing an invulnerable homeland and an industrial base 10 times that of Japan? The Pacific War was one that Japan was always going to lose, so how does one explain Tokyo's decision? Did the Japanese recognize the odds against them? Did they have a concept of victory, or at least of avoiding defeat? Or did the Japanese prefer a lost war to an unacceptable peace?

Dr. Jeffrey Record takes a fresh look at Japan's decision for war, and concludes that it was dictated by Japanese pride and the threatened economic destruction of Japan by the United States. He believes that Japanese aggression in East Asia was the root cause of the Pacific War, but argues that the road to war in 1941 was built on American as well as Japanese miscalculations and that both sides suffered from cultural ignorance and racial arrogance. Record finds that the Americans underestimated the role of fear and honor in Japanese calculations and overestimated the effectiveness of economic sanctions as a deterrent to war, whereas the Japanese underestimated the cohesion and resolve of an aroused American society and overestimated their own martial prowess as a means of defeating U.S. material superiority. He believes that the failure of deterrence was mutual, and that the descent of the United States and Japan into war contains lessons of great and continuing relevance to American foreign policy and defense decisionmakers.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this monograph as a contribution to the national security debate over the use of force to advance the objectives of U.S. foreign policy.



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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

JEFFREY RECORD is a well-known defense policy critic and teaches strategy at the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama. He has served as a pacification advisor in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam War, Rockefeller Younger Scholar on the Brookings Institution's Defense Analysis Staff, and Senior Fellow at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, the Hudson Institute, and the BDM International Corporation. Dr. Record also has extensive Capitol Hill experience, serving as Legislative Assistant for National Security Affairs to Senators Sam Nunn and Lloyd Bentsen, and later as a Professional Staff Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. He is the author of eight books and over a dozen monographs, including *Beating Goliath: Why Insurgencies Win*; *Dark Victory: America's Second War Against Iraq*; *Making War, Thinking History: Munich, Vietnam, and Presidential Uses of Force from Korea to Kosovo*; *Hollow Victory, A Contrary View of the Gulf War*; *The Wrong War, Why We Lost in Vietnam*; and *Bounding the Global War on Terrorism*. Dr. Record received his doctorate at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

SUMMARY

The Japanese decision to initiate war against the United States in 1941 continues to perplex. Did the Japanese recognize the odds against them? How did they expect to defeat the United States? The presumption of irrationality is natural, given Japan's acute imperial overstretch in 1941 and America's overwhelming industrial might and latent military power. The Japanese decision for war, however, must be seen in the light of the available alternatives in the fall of 1941, which were either national economic suffocation or surrender of Tokyo's empire on the Asian mainland. Though Japanese aggression in East Asia was the root cause of the Pacific War, the road to Pearl Harbor was built on American as well as Japanese miscalculations, most of them mired in mutual cultural ignorance and racial arrogance.

Japan's aggression in China, military alliance with Hitler, and proclamation of a "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" that included resource-rich Southeast Asia were major milestones along the road to war, but the proximate cause was Japan's occupation of southern French Indochina in July 1941, which placed Japanese forces in a position to grab Malaya, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies. Japan's threatened conquest of Southeast Asia, which in turn would threaten Great Britain's ability to resist Nazi aggression in Europe, prompted the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt to sanction Japan by imposing an embargo on U.S. oil exports upon which the Japanese economy was critically dependent. Yet the embargo, far from deterring further Japanese aggression, prompted a Tokyo decision to invade Southeast Asia. By mid-1941 Japanese leaders believed that war with the United

States was inevitable and that it was imperative to seize the Dutch East Indies, which offered a substitute for dependency on American oil. The attack on Pearl Harbor was essentially a flanking raid in support of the main event, which was the conquest of Malaya, Singapore, the Indies, and the Philippines,

Japan's decision for war rested on several assumptions, some realistic, others not. The first was that time was working against Japan—i.e., the longer they took to initiate war with the United States, the dimmer its prospects for success. The Japanese also assumed they had little chance of winning a protracted war with the United States but hoped they could force the Americans into a murderous, island-by-island slog across the Central and Southwestern Pacific that would eventually exhaust American will to fight on to total victory. The Japanese believed they were racially and spiritually superior to the Americans, whom they regarded as an effete, creature-comforted people divided by political factionalism and racial and class strife.

U.S. attempts to deter Japanese expansion into the Southwestern Pacific via the imposition of harsh economic sanctions, redeployment of the U.S. Fleet from southern California to Pearl Harbor, and the dispatch of B-17 long-range bombers to the Philippines all failed because the United States insisted that Japan evacuate both Indochina *and* China as the price for a restoration of U.S. trade. The United States demanded, in effect, that Japan abandon its empire, and by extension its aspiration to become a great power, and submit to the economic dominion of the United States—something no self-respecting Japanese leader could accept.

The Japanese-American road to the Pacific War in 1941 yields several enduring lessons of particular rele-

vance for today's national security decisionmakers:

1. Fear and honor, "rational" or not, can motivate as much as interest.

2. There is no substitute for knowledge of a potential adversary's history and culture.

3. Deterrence lies in the mind of the deterree, not the deterrer.

4. Strategy must always inform and guide operations.

5. Economic sanctioning can be tantamount to an act of war.

6. The presumption of moral or spiritual superiority can fatally discount the consequences of an enemy's material superiority.

7. "Inevitable" war easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

JAPAN'S DECISION FOR WAR IN 1941: SOME ENDURING LESSONS

Introduction: A "Strategic Imbecility"?

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, continues to perplex. American naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison called Tokyo's decision for war against the United States "a strategic imbecility."¹ How, in mid-1941, could Japan, militarily mired in China and seriously considering an opportunity for war with the Soviet Union, even think about yet another war, this one against a distant country with a 10-fold industrial superiority? The United States was not only stronger; it lay beyond Japan's military reach. The United States could out-produce Japan in every category of armaments as well as build weapons, such as long-range bombers, that Japan could not; and though Japan could fight a war in East Asia and the Western Pacific, it could not threaten the American homeland. In attacking Pearl Harbor, Japan elected to fight a geographically limited war against an enemy capable of waging a total war against the Japanese home islands themselves.

Did the Japanese recognize the odds against them? What could possibly prompt such a reckless course of action as the attack on Pearl Harbor? Fatalism? Delusional reasoning? Madness? Was there no acceptable alternative to war with the United States in 1941? And if not, how did Tokyo expect to compel the United States to accept Japanese hegemony in East Asia? Did the Japanese have a concept of victory, or at least of avoiding defeat? Or were they simply, as New York congressman Hamilton Fish declared the day after Pearl Harbor, a "stark, raving mad" people who, by attacking the United States, had "committed military, naval, and national suicide"?²

What lessons can be drawn from the Japanese decision for war in 1941? From U.S.-Japanese policy interaction during the months leading to Pearl Harbor? Are there lessons of value to today's national security decisionmakers?

The Presumption of Irrationality.

The Pacific War arose out of Japan's drive for national glory and economic security via the conquest of East Asia and the Roosevelt administration's belief that it could check Japan's bid for an Asian empire via trade sanctions and military deployments. The Japanese sought to free themselves from economic dependence on the United States, whereas the Americans sought to use that dependence to contain Japanese imperial ambitions. The Japanese sought to overturn the territorial status quo in Asia, whereas the United States sought to preserve it. Given the scope of Japan's ambitions, which included the expulsion of Western power and influence from Southeast Asia, and given Japan's alliance with Nazi Germany (against whom the United States was tacitly allied with Great Britain), war with the United States was probably inevitable by the end of 1941 even though Japanese prospects for winning a war with the United States were minimal.

The disaster that awaited Japan in its war with the United States was rooted in a fatal excess of ambition over power. Japan's imperial ambitions, which included Soviet territory in Northeast Asia as well as China and Western-controlled territory in Southeast Asia, lay beyond Japan's material capacity. Japan wanted to be a great power of the first rank like the United States, Great Britain, and Germany but lacked the industrial base and military capacity to become one. Moreover,

Japan sought both a continental empire over the teeming populations of the Asian mainland, as well as a maritime empire in the Southwestern Pacific – a tall order given China’s rising nationalism and the global naval superiority of Great Britain and the United States. Few Japanese leaders appreciated the limits of Japan’s power; on the contrary, many had wildly exaggerated ideas of Japan’s destiny and ability to fulfill it.

The presumption of Japanese irrationality is natural given Japan’s acute imperial overstretch in 1941 and the huge disparity between Japan’s industrial base and military power and America’s industrial base and latent military power. Dean Acheson, who in 1941 was Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, declared before Pearl Harbor that “no rational Japanese could believe that an attack on us could result in anything but disaster for his country.”³ Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson believed the Japanese, “however wicked their intentions, would have the good sense not to get involved in a war with the United States.”⁴ Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto certainly had good sense. In October 1940 he warned that “[t]o fight the United States is like fighting the whole world. . . . Doubtless I shall die aboard the *Nagato* [his flagship]. Meanwhile, Tokyo will be burnt to the ground three times.”⁵ Barely 2 months before Pearl Harbor, Yamamoto predicted:

It is obvious that a Japanese-American war will become a protracted one. As long as the tides of war are in our favor, the United States will never stop fighting. As a consequence, the war will continue for several years, during which [our] material [resources] will be exhausted, vessels and arms will be damaged, and they can be replaced only with great difficulties. Ultimately we will not be able to contend with [the United States]. As a result of war the people’s livelihood will become indigent . . . and it is hard not to imagine [that] the

situation will become out of control. We must not start a war with so little chance of success.⁶

Postwar assessments are no less condemnatory. "The Japanese bet, in 1941," wrote Raymond Aron in 1966, "was *senseless*, since on paper the Empire of the Rising Sun had no chance of winning and could avoid losing only if the Americans were too lazy or cowardly to conquer."⁷ Gordon Prange, the great historian of Pearl Harbor, called the attack the beginning of "a reckless war it [Japan] could not possibly win."⁸ Edward N. Luttwak, in his *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, contended that the Japanese had no victory options after Pearl Harbor other than "an invasion of California, followed by the conquest of the major centers of American life and culminating with an imposed peace dictated to some collaborating government in Washington." Luttwak conceded that such a strategy lay fantastically beyond Japan's power, and, in fact, no Japanese leader ever proposed an invasion of the United States. "So the best Japanese option after Pearl Harbor was to sue immediately for peace, bargaining away Japan's ability to resist eventual defeat for some years in exchange for whatever the United States would concede to avoid having to fight for its victory."⁹ For strategist Colin Gray, the "Asia-Pacific War of 1941-45 was a conflict that Imperial Japan was *always* going to lose. It remains a cultural and strategic puzzle why so many Japanese military and political leaders endorsed the decision to go to war in 1941 while knowing that fact."¹⁰ Roberta Wohlstetter, in her path-breaking *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, denounced the fanciful Japanese thinking behind the decision for war: "Most unreal was their assumption that the United States, with 10 times the military potential and a reputation

for waging war until unconditional surrender, would after a short struggle accept the annihilation of a considerable part of its naval and air forces and the whole of its power in the Far East.”¹¹ Perhaps the most savage indictment is that of Haruo Tohmatsu and H. P. Willmott:

[N]o state or nation has ever been granted immunity from its own stupidity. But Japan’s defeat in World War II was awesome. The coalition of powers that it raised against itself, the nature of its defeat across an entire ocean, and the manner in which the war ended represented an astonishing and remarkable, if unintended, achievement on the part of Japan.¹²

Was the Japanese decision for war in 1941 just a matter of stupidity? Can it be dismissed as simply a cultural puzzle? Is it beyond comprehension?

Thucydides famously explained the desire of ancient Athens to retain its empire by declaring that “fear, honor, and interest” were among “three of the strongest motives.”¹³ Realist theories in international politics focus on calculations of power and interest as the primary drivers of state behavior, and in so doing tend to discount factors, such as ideology and pride, that distort “rational” analysis of risks and rewards. Ideology and pride, however, are central to understanding the international behavior of many states, including Japan from 1931 to 1945. For some states, including Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany, ideology and national interest were inseparable. Indeed, the influence of ideology on the foreign policy decisionmaking of the great powers of the 20th century, especially Imperial Germany, Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, Communist China, and – yes – the United States, deserves more academic scrutiny than it has received.

It is the central conclusion of this monograph that *the Japanese decision for war against the United States in 1941 was dictated by Japanese pride and the threatened economic destruction of Japan by the United States*. The United States sought to deter Japanese imperial expansion into Southeast Asia by employing its enormous leverage over the Japanese economy; it demanded that Japan withdraw its forces from both Indochina *and* China – in effect that Japan renounce its empire in exchange for a restoration of trade with the United States and acceptance of American principles of international behavior. Observed Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart in retrospect: “No Government, least of all the Japanese, could be expected to swallow such humiliating conditions, and utter loss of face.”¹⁴

This conclusion excuses neither the attack on Pearl Harbor nor the stupidity of Tokyo’s statecraft in the 1930s in placing Japan in a situation where war, surrender, and impoverishment were the only policy choices available. Like Nazi Germany, Japan was, in the decade of the 1930s, a serial aggressor state that eventually brought about its own downfall by picking too many powerful enemies. Japan’s attempt to conquer China and to displace Western power in Southeast Asia inevitably provoked armed resistance. Stumbling into a war that Japan was “*always* going to lose” owed much to Japanese racism, fatalism, imperial arrogance, and cultural ignorance. The Japanese confused honor with interest by permitting their imperial ambitions to run far ahead of their military capacity to achieve them. Indeed, the Japanese, like the Germans (and later, the Israelis), displayed a remarkable incapacity for sound strategic thinking; they were simultaneously mesmerized by short-term operational opportunities and blind to their likely disastrous long-term strategic

consequences. How else could Tokyo consider war with the United States *and* the Soviet Union *in addition* to a debilitating 4-year war it did not know how to win in China?

Nor does this monograph's thesis excuse the savagery of Japanese behavior in East Asia during the 1930s and 1940s or the unwillingness of postwar Japanese governments to acknowledge and atone for that behavior. The Japanese, unlike the Germans, have refused to come to terms with their past wars of conquest and their atrocious treatment of conquered populations, and the argument that the American atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki absolves the Japanese of any moral responsibility for their own prior transgressions in East Asia is patently absurd. (In October 2008, the chief of staff of the Japanese air force was relieved of command for writing an essay in which he justified Japanese colonialism, denied that Japan had waged wars of aggression, and suggested that Roosevelt had lured the Japanese into attacking Pearl Harbor.¹⁵ The incident was but the latest involving a misstatement of the history of Japan's behavior in East Asia in the 1930s and 1940s by a high-ranking Japanese official.)

All that said, however, it is necessary to observe that the United States was also guilty of grievous miscalculation in the Pacific in 1941. It takes at least two parties to transform a political dispute into war. Racism was hardly unique to the Japanese, and Americans were, if anything, even more culturally ignorant of Japan than the Japanese were of the United States. The conviction, widespread within the Roosevelt administration until the last months of 1941, that no sensible Japanese leader could rationally contemplate war with the United States, blinded key policymakers

to the likely consequences of such reckless decisions as the imposition of what amounted to a complete trade embargo of Japan in the summer of 1941. The embargo abruptly deprived Japan of 80 percent of its oil requirements, confronting Tokyo with the choice of either submitting to U.S. demands that it give up its empire in China and resume its economic dependency on the United States or, alternatively, advancing into resource-rich Southeast Asia and placing its expanded empire on an economically independent foundation. The embargo thus provoked rather than cowed Japan. David Kahn has observed that:

American racism and rationalism kept the United States from thinking that Japan would attack it. . . . Japan was not only more distant [than Germany]; since she had no more than half America's population and only one-ninth of America's industrial output, rationality seemed to preclude her attacking the United States. And disbelief in a Japanese attack was reinforced by belief in the superiority of the white race. Americans looked upon Japanese as bucktoothed, bespectacled little yellow men, forever photographing things with their omnipresent cameras so they could copy them. Such opinions were held not only by common bigots but by opinion makers as well.¹⁶

Indeed, more than a few administration decision-makers, Stimson among them, suspected that Germany was behind the Pearl Harbor attack. Prange observed that "It was difficult for these men in Washington to accept the fact that a military operation so swift, so ruthless, so painfully successful – in a word, so blitzkrieg – in nature did not originate with Hitler."¹⁷

It was easy to dismiss the Japanese as a serious military challenge. Today, "we can easily forget how

little credibility Westerners assigned to the Japanese military in 1941," reminds Jean Edward Smith.

The army had been bogged down in China for four years; Zhukov had made quick work of the garrison in Manchukuo; and the Japanese Navy had not been engaged in battle on the high seas since 1905. "The Japs," as FDR called them, might prevail in Southeast Asia, but they were scarcely seen as a threat to American forces in the Pacific, certainly not to Pearl Harbor, which both the Army and the Navy believed to be impregnable.¹⁸

Indeed, the crushing defeat of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) at Nomohan (Khalkin-Gol) by Soviet armor and artillery in August 1939 revealed the relative technological primitiveness and operational inflexibility of the IJA as well as the comparative weakness of Japan's industrial base.¹⁹ In the years before the war, recounts Gordon Prange, "Americans assured one another that Japan was virtually bankrupt, short of raw materials, and hopelessly bogged down in China. It lagged 100 years behind the times, and in case of a major conflict, its wheel-barrow economy would shatter like a teacup hurled against a brick wall."²⁰

The issue of "rationality" is a false one. Cultures as disparate as those of the United States and Japan in the 1930s defy a common standard of rationality. Rationality lies in the eyes of the beholder, and "rational" leaders can make horribly mistaken decisions. American examples include the Truman administration's decision to cross the 38th Parallel in Korea in 1950, which witlessly provoked an unnecessary war with China; the Johnson administration's decision to commit U.S. ground combat forces to South Vietnam's defense in 1965; and the George W. Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

Was Churchill's decision to fight on after Dunkirk rational? In May-June 1940 Britain had no means of effectively challenging Hitler's domination of Europe. London had no remaining continental allies (the Soviet Union was Hitler's ally from 1939 to 1941), and the isolationist United States might as well have been on another planet. Britain's only hope of survival, and it was just that—hope—lay in American and Soviet entry into the war, which in turn depended on the chance of profound strategic miscalculations by Germany and Japan. That such miscalculations were forthcoming in Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and Japan's attack on the United States in December was, for Churchill, sheer luck. Absent those monumental blunders, Britain would have been finished as a European power and perhaps eventually destroyed by Germany. A "realist" prime minister in May-June 1940 might have explored the possibility of a negotiated departure of Britain from the war by formally accepting German hegemony on the continent (including British evacuation of Gibraltar) in exchange for Hitler's guarantee of the British empire's integrity. Indeed, some members of Churchill's cabinet—notably Lord Halifax—are known to have favored exploration of a possible settlement via an approach to Mussolini.²¹ Fighting on without allies would have been heroic but futile (one is reminded of Japan's doomed struggle from Okinawa to Nagasaki). Sooner or later, the weight of Germany's military might, reinforced by its conquests in Europe (and continued massive deliveries of grain and other strategically critical raw materials from the Soviet Union), would have proved decisive.

Japan's decision for war was made after months of agonizing internal debate by leaders who recognized America's vast industrial superiority and who, in the

more sober moments, suffered few illusions about Japan's chances in a protracted war against America. Japan's leaders did not want war with the United States, but by the fall of 1941 few saw any acceptable alternative to war. They believed that Japan's invasion of British- and Dutch-controlled Southeast Asia would mean war with the United States, and they resigned themselves to it. Nor did the United States want war with Japan. The Roosevelt administration was committed to stopping Hitler in Europe; engaged in an undeclared shooting war with Nazi submarines in the North Atlantic; and wedded to a "Germany-first" strategy in the event of war with all the Axis powers. The last thing Roosevelt wanted was a war in the Pacific. The administration was unwilling to go to war over China and mistakenly believed that it could deter or retard a Japanese advance into Southeast Asia via the retention of powerful naval forces in Hawaii, the imposition economic sanctions, and the deployment of long-range bombers to the Philippines. It presumed realism and rationality on the part of the Japanese and failed to understand that sanctions it imposed upon Japan in the summer of 1941 were tantamount to an act of war. Jonathan Utley observes:

No one during the fall of 1941 wanted war with Japan. [The] Navy preferred to concentrate on the Atlantic. [The] Army said it needed a few more months before it would be ready in the Philippines. [Secretary of State Cordell] Hull had made the search for peace his primary concern for months. Roosevelt could see nothing to be gained by a war with Japan. Hawks such as Acheson, [Interior Secretary Harold] Ickes, and [Treasury Secretary Henry] Morgenthau argued that their strong policies would avoid war, not provoke one.²²

Prange convincingly argued that “No one who has examined the great mass of historical evidence on Pearl Harbor can doubt that the United States wanted to maintain peace with Japan for as long as possible” because it “wished to remain free to assist Great Britain and defeat Hitler.”²³

Japanese Aggression and U.S. Policy Responses, 1937-41.

The Japanese decision for war against the United States was the product of Japanese fatalism, racial arrogance, cultural incomprehension, and strategic miscalculation. The decision followed (1) four years of stalemated Japanese aggression in China, (2) Tokyo’s proclamation in August 1940 of a “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” that encompassed Southeast Asia as well as China, Manchuria, and Korea, and (3) Japan’s entry into a military alliance—the Tripartite Pact of September 1940—with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Having annexed Korea in 1910 and seized Manchuria in 1931, Japan invaded China in 1937. By the beginning of 1941, Japan had conquered much of north and central China, seized all of China’s major ports as well as Hainan Island and the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, and established a military presence in northern French Indochina. Japan was poised to invade resource-rich Southeast Asia, which Japanese propagandists had long and loudly proclaimed was rightfully within Japan’s sphere of influence, notwithstanding the fact that almost all of Southeast Asia lay under British, Dutch, French, and American colonial rule.

The United States had never recognized Japan’s Manchurian puppet state of Manchukuo and opposed

Japan's war in China. The United States recognized Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang as the legitimate government of China and provided it financial and later military assistance. The Roosevelt administration also rightly regarded the Tripartite Pact as directed against the United States. Japan's alliance with Hitler, which was clearly intended to deter the United States from going to war with Germany or Japan by raising the specter of a two-ocean war,²⁴ transformed Japan from regional threat into a potential extension of Hitler's agenda of aggression, especially with respect to the Soviet Union after the Nazi invasion of June 22, 1941. "No other action could so directly or effectively have seemed to bear out the contention of the hard-line faction in Washington that Japan's southward drive was part of a vast Axis plan for world conquest that would eventually reach America unless she acted immediately to stop it," observes Sachiko Murakami.²⁵ Roosevelt viewed the Soviet Union as an indispensable belligerent against Hitler and took the threat of a Japanese invasion of Siberia from Manchuria quite seriously; there is even evidence that he deliberately stiffened U.S. policy toward Japan in the wake of Germany's invasion of Russia for the purpose of encouraging the Japanese to look south rather than north.²⁶ "The great question for world leaders in the first half of 1941 was whether Hitler would attack the Soviet Union, and the great question in the latter half was whether he would succeed," observes Waldo Heinrichs. "The German-Soviet conflict had a direct bearing on Japanese-American relations."²⁷

But the Roosevelt administration also regarded a Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia, especially the oil-rich Dutch East Indies and tin- and rubber-rich British Malaya, as strategically unacceptable. Control

of Southeast Asia would not only weaken the British Empire and threaten India, Australia, and New Zealand; it would also afford Japan access to oil and other critical raw materials that would reduce its economic dependence on the United States. The administration, contends Jonathan Marshall, was wedded to the “fundamental proposition that the United States and Britain could not afford to lose the raw material wealth and the sea lanes of Southeast Asia” even if it meant war.²⁸ Though the administration was never prepared to go to war over China, it regarded an extension of Japan’s empire into Southeast Asia as unacceptable. Thus Japan provoked a strong American response when Japanese forces occupied *southern* French Indochina in July 1941 as an obvious preliminary to further southward military moves. (In 1940 the United States had cracked Japan’s most secret diplomatic code—known as PURPLE—and was therefore privy to key foreign ministry traffic regarding Japan’s intentions.)

The United States was prepared to declare economic war on Japan as a means of deterring—or at least delaying—a Japanese advance into Southeast Asia, and that is exactly what the Roosevelt administration did in July 1941. Roosevelt did not envisage an abrupt shut down of all U.S. trade with Japan when he signed the order freezing Japanese assets in the United States on July 26. As Roosevelt told Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, he intended to use the order’s requirement that the Japanese obtain export licenses to release frozen dollars for purchase of any further U.S. products as a “noose around Japan’s neck” which he would “give it a jerk now and then.”²⁹ The aim of the asset freeze, at least in Roosevelt’s mind, “was to avoid provoking Japan while bringing more and more pressure to

bear, not only to impede Japan's war production, but also to haunt it with the constant threat that more severe measures might be applied."³⁰ Thus Roosevelt intended that oil shipments to Japan continue, albeit in reduced quantities, because he believed that a complete embargo could provoke a Japanese attack on the Dutch East Indies.³¹ The Roosevelt administration was well aware that Japan imported 90 percent of its oil, of which 75-80 percent was from the United States (which in 1940 accounted for an astounding 63 percent of the world's output of petroleum). Roosevelt also knew that the Dutch East Indies, which produced 3 percent of the world's output, was the only other convenient oil producer that could meet Japan's import needs.³²

The freeze order was the culmination of a program of sanctioning Japan for its aggression in China that began in January 1940 with the U.S. withdrawal from its 1911 commercial treaty with Japan (notice of abrogation was given in July 1939). Sanctioning escalated in July 1940 with the passage of the National Defense Act, which granted the administration authority to ban or restrict the export of items declared vital to national defense. On July 25 Roosevelt announced a ban on Japanese acquisition of U.S. high-octane aviation gasoline, certain grades of steel and scrap iron, and some lubricants. In September the White House imposed a ban on all scrap iron exports to Japan. Because the Japanese steel industry was highly dependent on imported scrap iron from the United States, the ban compelled Japan to draw down its stockpiles and operate its steel industry well below capacity; indeed, the ban blocked any significant expansion of Japanese steel production during the war.³³ In December the embargo was expanded to include iron ore, steel, and

steel products, and the following month expanded to include copper (of which the United States supplied 80 percent of Japan's requirements), brass, bronze, zinc, nickel, and potash. "Almost every week thereafter other items were added to the list, each of which was much needed for Japanese industrial production."³⁴ Thus by July 1941, the United States was already severely punishing Japan for its continued aggression in China and adherence to the Tripartite Pact.

By early 1941 the United States had in place an imposing number of embargoes on the shipment of materials to Japan, nearly all of them had been justified, and most of them correctly justified, as measures necessary for the American rearmament effort. But for this very reason they had a substantial impact on Japan's own war economy. Tokyo's only source of materials crucial for war—scrap iron, steel, machine tools, ferroalloys, aluminum—was, excepting a trickle of supplies from Germany that came over the transSiberian railroad, the United States.³⁵

But, as Roosevelt understood, it was Japan's oil dependency on the United States, a dependency, ironically, that had deepened with Japan's expanding military operations in China, that constituted the real hangman's noose around Japan's neck. Moreover, by the summer of 1941 it had become politically difficult for the Roosevelt administration to justify the continued shipment of a commodity on which the Japanese war machine was so dependent. American public opinion was increasingly outraged, as were key members of Roosevelt's cabinet, including Secretary of the Interior Ickes, Secretary of the Treasury Morgenthau, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, and Secretary of War Henry Stimson, who believed that the continued shipment of oil to Japan was a national disgrace.³⁶ (Ickes favored a preventive war against Japan.³⁷) Thus for State and

Treasury department hardliners “who saw Japan as the enemy and economic sanctions as the effective weapon at hand,” a limited oil embargo was a half-measure inviting bureaucratic sabotage.³⁸ Led by State Department hawks Acheson and Stanley Hornbeck, head of State’s Far Eastern Division, they believed that Japan was a paper tiger that would collapse in response to strong U.S. pressure, and they sought to threaten Japan’s economic ruin by converting the freeze order into a complete suspension of trade (including oil) through their control of the complicated procedures that compelled Japanese importers to obtain export licenses from the State Department as well as exchange permits (to release frozen funds) from the Treasury Department.³⁹ Both Acheson and Morgenthau had favored punitive sanctions for years and took advantage of the freeze order to deny all Japanese requests for licenses and exchange permits.⁴⁰

The result, in conjunction with the seizure of Japanese assets by Great Britain and the Netherlands, was a complete suspension of Japanese economic access to the United States and the destruction of between 50 and 75 percent of Japan’s foreign trade.⁴¹ In early November 1941, Joseph Grew, the U.S. ambassador to Japan, cabled Secretary of State Hull that “the greater part of Japanese commerce has been lost, Japanese industrial production has been drastically curtailed, and Japan’s national resources have been depleted.” Grew went on to warn of “an all-out, do-or-die attempt, actually risking national hara kiri, to make Japan impervious to economic embargoes abroad rather than to yield to foreign pressure.”⁴² Even in retrospect, Acheson, for his part, claimed that the embargo’s aim was “to limit Japanese military action in East and Southeast Asia,” and that though the “danger of provoking Japan to seize . . . the Dutch East Indies . . . or move against

us" was recognized, the feeling was that "no rational Japanese could believe that an attack on us could result in anything but disaster for his country. Of course, no one even dimly foresaw the initial success of [the Japanese] attack [on Pearl Harbor]." ⁴³

Roosevelt was much less confident. Neither he nor U.S. Army Chief of Staff George Marshall nor U.S. Chief of Naval Operations Harold "Betty" Stark wanted to force a showdown with Japan. All three men were preoccupied with the war in Europe and regarded Nazi Germany as a far greater threat to U.S. security than Imperial Japan. Marshall, Stark, and other senior U.S. military leaders favored restraint in the Pacific,⁴⁴ whereas Roosevelt wanted the bargaining leverage of a limited embargo because he believed that an abrupt shut down of U.S. trade with Japan would likely provoke a Japanese advance into Southeast Asia, which would probably mean war. As early as October 1940 Roosevelt told Hull and Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles that an oil shut-off would force Japan to attack the Dutch East Indies, a judgment he repeated to a White House audience just 2 days after ordering the freeze of Japanese assets.⁴⁵ Yet upon discovering, after his return from the Placentia Bay conference with Winston Churchill in August, that all oil exports to Japan had, in fact, been suspended, Roosevelt declined to reverse the decision. The reasons remain unclear. Perhaps he believed that a reversal would look like a retreat, or perhaps he had come to regard a Japanese advance into Southeast Asia as inevitable. If war was now a certainty, then a complete embargo would weaken Japan's capacity to wage war.⁴⁶ Roosevelt was also pursuing a highly-interventionist policy in Europe for which he needed the support of Stimson, Morgenthau, Ickes, and other anti-Japanese hardliners;

he may have felt that he risked alienating the hardliners by continued lack of decisive intervention against Japan.⁴⁷

The culmination of U.S. economic warfare against Japan by late summer of 1941 confronted Tokyo with essentially two choices: seizure of Southeast Asia, or submission to the United States. Economic destitution and attendant military paralysis would soon become a reality if Japan did nothing. The embargo was already beginning to strangle Japanese industry, and Japan's stockpiled oil amounted to no more than 18-24 months of normal consumption – and substantially less should Japan mount major military operations in Southeast Asia.⁴⁸ As National Planning Board Director Teiichi Suzuki declared before an Imperial audience on September 6, 1941:

At this stage our national power with respect to physical resources has come to depend entirely upon the productive capacity of the Empire itself, upon that of Manchuria, China, Indochina . . . and upon vital materials stockpiled so far. Therefore, as a result of the present overall economic blockade imposed by Great Britain and the United States, our Empire's national power is declining day by day. Our liquid fuel stockpile, which is the most important, will reach bottom by June or July of next year, even if we impose strict wartime control on civilian demand. Accordingly, I believe it is vitally important for the survival of our Empire that we make up our minds to establish and stabilize a firm economic base.⁴⁹

Two months later, at another conference of Japanese leaders, Prime Minister Hideki Tojo warned that "Two years from now we will have no petroleum for military use. Ships will stop moving We can talk about austerity and suffering, but can our people endure

such a life for a long time? . . . I fear that we would become a third-class nation after 2 or 3 years if we just sat tight.”⁵⁰

Yet the price the Americans demanded for lifting the embargo and restoring U.S.-Japanese trade to some semblance of normality was no more acceptable: abandonment of empire. The Roosevelt administration demanded that Japan not only terminate its membership in the Tripartite Alliance, but also withdraw its military forces from both China and Indochina, and by extension, the Japanese feared, Manchuria (after all, the United States had refused to recognize the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo). Abandonment of China and Indochina would have compelled Japan to write off its hard-won gains on the Asian mainland since 1937 and drop any hope of becoming the dominant power in East Asia. For Japan, a major reason for establishing an empire in East Asia was to free itself of the very kind of humiliating economic dependency on the United States that the embargo represented. And what was to stop the Americans from coercing further territorial concessions from the Japanese, including withdrawal from Manchuria and even Korea and Formosa? Japan “could not accept any interim solution that left it dependent on American largesse” or any deal that left it in a position of “continued reliance on the whims of Washington. The possibility that the Americans might supply Japan with just enough oil, steel, and other materials to maintain a starveling existence was intolerable to any Japanese statesman.”⁵¹ Consider the assessment of Yoshimichi Hara, President of the Imperial Privy Council (composed of Japan’s ex-premiers), on the eve of the Pearl Harbor attack:

If we were to give in, we would give up in one stroke not only our gains in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese

wars, but also the benefits of the Manchurian Incident. This we cannot do. We are loathe to compel our people to suffer even greater hardships, on top of what they have endured during the four years since the China Incident. But it is clear that the existence of our country is being threatened, that the great achievements of the Emperor Meiji would all come to naught, and that there is nothing else we can do.⁵²

The United States was, in effect, demanding that Japan renounce its status as an aspiring great power and consign itself to permanent strategic dependency on a hostile Washington. Such a choice would have been unacceptable to any great power. Japan's survival as a major industrial and military power was a stake — far more compelling reasons for war than the United States later advanced for its disastrous wars of choice in Vietnam and Iraq. Would the United States ever have permitted a hostile power to wreck its foreign commerce and strangle its domestic economy without a resort to war?

If the United States had been faced with a similar boycott which equally endangered its future, few Americans would have questioned the propriety of waging a major war to restore the prerequisites of American survival. . . . A body blow of this caliber could have driven multitudes beyond even caring about "winability." National self-respect and even the quest for naked vengeance . . . would have reinforced necessity and swept aside any objections. If the United States would have launched a preemptive war under such circumstances, why is it so surprising that the Japanese did so?⁵³

The American campaign of economic warfare culminating in the total embargo of U.S. trade with Japan in the late summer of 1941 made sense only as a defense measure — i.e., as a means of weakening Japan in anticipation of inevitable war. It could never have

succeeded as a deterrent to war because the Japanese, with considerable reason, regarded the embargo as an act of war mandating a response in kind.

Roberta Wohlstetter contended that, for Japan, "war with the United States was not chosen. The decision for war was rather forced by the desire to avoid the terrible alternative of losing status or abandoning [its] national objectives."⁵⁴ The historian Akira Iriye has written of the oil embargo that it:

had a tremendous psychological impact upon the Japanese. The ambivalence and ambiguities in their perception of world events disappeared, replaced by a sense of clear-cut alternatives. Hitherto they had not confronted the stark choice between war and peace as an immediate prospect and had lived in a climate of uncertainty from day to day. Now, with the United States resorting to decisive measures, that phase passed. Any wishful thinking that America would tolerate the invasion of southern Indochina was dissipated; either Japan would stay in Southeast Asia at the risk of war with the Anglo-American countries or it would retreat to conciliate them. The military judged that it was too late for conciliation; Japan would now have to consider the likelihood of war, with the United States as its major adversary.⁵⁵

Ian Kershaw contends that "For no faction of the Japanese elites could there be a retreat from the goals of a victorious settlement in China and successful expansion to establish . . . Japanese domination of the Far East." These objectives "had not just become an economic imperative. They reflected honour and national pride, the prestige and standing of a great power. The alternatives were seen as not just poverty, but defeat, humiliation, ignominy, and an end to great power status in permanent subordination to the United States."⁵⁶ Indeed, better to die fighting than

to capitulate. “[S]ince Japan is unavoidably facing national ruin whether it decides to fight the United States or submit to its demands, it must by all means choose to fight,” declared Admiral Osami Nagano, the Chief of Staff of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), at an Imperial Conference in September 1941. “Japan would rather go down fighting than ignobly surrender without a struggle, because surrender would spell spiritual as well as physical ruin for the nation and its destiny.”⁵⁷

War—even a lost war—was clearly preferable to humiliation and starvation. Seizure of the Dutch East Indies and British possessions in Southeast Asia (Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei, and British North Borneo) offered Japan the only alternative to oil and other resource dependence on the United States. It also meant certain war with Great Britain and the Netherlands, and probably war with the United States. Neither the British nor the Dutch were in a position to defend their Southeast Asian possessions, however, and the United States was preoccupied with events in Europe. Could the Japanese move into Southeast Asia without provoking war with the United States? Japanese leaders were initially divided on this question, but finally concluded that even a southward military advance that avoided attacks on the Philippines and other American targets almost certainly would provoke an armed U.S. response and therefore that it was imperative to strike the first blow. Even if Japan’s advance did not provoke war, an untouched Philippines (and U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor) would constitute an unacceptable potential military threat along the eastern flank of Japan’s southward advance. IJN leaders were particularly insistent that the United States and Great Britain were strategically inseparable, and that Washington would go to war

with Japan if Japan went to war with Great Britain.⁵⁸ Additionally, by this time many Japanese leaders had come to believe that war with the United States was inevitable, and there seemed to be no appreciation of the difficulties Roosevelt would have confronted in securing a congressional declaration of war in response to a Japanese attack only on British and Dutch colonial possessions in Southeast Asia.

By the end of the 1930s [Japan's] international intransigence and naked military aggression had created a situation in which the survival of Japan as a great power, and of her conception of an Asian empire, did indeed hang in the balance. By the fall of 1941 the question had come to be not whether there was to be a war with the Western powers, including the latently powerful United States, but, given the regional and world situation, whether there would ever come a more favorable time to solve Japan's resource problems by military action.⁵⁹

Japanese Assumptions.

The Japanese brought several beliefs, or assumptions, to their consideration of war with the United States. Some were realistic, others not, and the line between reasonable expectation and wishful thinking was often blurred. The first assumption was that time was working against Japan—i.e., the longer Japan waited to initiate war against the United States, the dimmer its prospects for success. This assumption was grimly realistic. As the embargo took hold and the United States accelerated its rearmament, Japan's economic and military power vis-à-vis that of the United States began to rapidly decline. In the critical category of naval tonnage, Japan in late 1941 possessed a competitive 70 percent of total U.S. naval tonnage (including tonnage

deployed in the Atlantic), but the Japanese correctly projected, based on existing naval building programs (and excluding estimated losses), that the ratio would drop to 65 percent in 1942, 50 percent in 1943, and 30 percent in 1944.⁶⁰ The Two-Ocean Navy Act passed by Congress in July 1940 called for a 70 percent increase in U.S. naval tonnage, including construction of 18 aircraft carriers, 6 battleships, 33 cruisers, 115 destroyers, and 43 submarines.⁶¹ H. P. Willmott has observed that the act “doomed the Imperial Navy to second-class status, since the activities of American shipyards would be as catastrophic for Japanese aspirations as a disastrous naval battle would be.”⁶² Yamamoto had warned Japanese leaders: “Anyone who has seen the auto factories in Detroit and the oil fields in Texas knows that Japan lacks the national power for a naval race with America.”⁶³ Japan’s relative naval strength would never be better than in 1941. Indeed, during the war years the United States built 8,812 naval vessels to Japan’s 589.⁶⁴ A month before Pearl Harbor, Army Chief of Staff Hajime Sugiyama warned that “the ratio of armament between Japan and the United States will become more unfavorable to us as time passes; and particularly, the gap in air armament will enlarge rapidly.”⁶⁵ In 1941 the United States produced 1,400 combat aircraft to Japan’s 3,200; 3 years later, the United States built 37,500 to Japan’s 8,300.⁶⁶

Thus the oil embargo drove the Japanese into the logic of preventive war: given war’s inevitability and our declining military power relative to the enemy’s, Japanese leaders reasoned, better war now than later. However poor Japan’s chances of defeating the United States, they were better in 1941 than in any coming year. At the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, the Pacific Ocean warship balance between Japan and the United

States was 10:8 in battleships, 10:3 in aircraft carriers, 18:13 in heavy cruisers, 20:11 in light cruisers, 112:80 in destroyers, and 65:56 in submarines.⁶⁷

A second and equally realistic assumption was that Japan had little chance of winning a protracted war with the United States. America's great material superiority would eventually bury Japan. If Japan had any chance of fighting a war with the United States to some kind of successful conclusion, it had to bring military operations to a head as soon as possible. As Yamamoto had warned Prime Minister Konoe in the fall of 1940, "if I am told to 'go at it,' you will see me run wild for half a year, maybe a year. But I have no confidence whatsoever when it comes to 2 years, 3 years."⁶⁸ Admiral Osami Nagano, the IJN's chief of staff, clearly understood that a protracted war benefited the United States. Indeed, he believed that "the probability is very high that they [the United States] will from the outset plan on a prolonged war. Therefore it will be necessary for us to be reconciled to this and to be prepared militarily for a long war." He hoped that the United States would "aim for a quick war leading to an early decision, send[ing] their principal naval units [into the Western Pacific], and challeng[ing] us to an immediate war," but he feared that "America will attempt to prolong the war, using her impregnable position, her superior industrial power, and her abundant resources."⁶⁹ Neither Nagano nor any other Japanese leader offered a practical alternative to fighting a war on American terms. Short-war Japan was going to pick a fight with a long-war enemy.

Given the expectation of a long war with the United States, how did Japan expect to survive? Did Japanese leaders have a theory of victory, or at least of defeat-avoidance? Japan was not strong enough to threaten

the American homeland, but was not the war going to be fought in East Asia and the Western Pacific, which the Japanese controlled or would soon control (after Tokyo's conquest of Southeast Asia)? Might Tokyo be able to fight the United States to a bloody stalemate on the Japanese side of the Pacific and extract from that stalemate some kind of political settlement with Washington that would preserve Japan's core imperial interests on the Asian mainland?

These questions point to a third Japanese assumption, or at least hope: namely, that by swiftly seizing and fortifying the Central and Southwestern Pacific, the Japanese could force the Americans into a murderous, island-by-island slog that would eventually exhaust their political will to fight on to total victory. Japan would raise the blood and treasure costs of the war beyond Washington's willingness to pay.⁷⁰ "The Japanese theory of victory," contends Colin Gray, "amounted to the hope—one hesitates to say calculation—that the United States would judge the cost of defeating Japan to be too heavy, too disproportionate to the worth of the interests at stake."⁷¹

This "strategy" was expressed in a document prepared by the Japanese military leadership for the critical Imperial Conference of September 6. The document, "The Essentials for Carrying Out the Empire's Policies," presented a series of questions and answers, one of which was: *What is the outlook in a war with Great Britain and the United States; particularly, how shall we end the war?* The answer:

A war with the United States and Great Britain will be long, and will become a war of endurance. It is very difficult to predict the termination of war, and it would be well-nigh impossible to expect the surrender of the United States. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that

the war may end because of a great change in American public opinion, which may result from such factors as the remarkable success of our military operations in the South [Southeast Asia] or the surrender of Great Britain. At any rate, we should be able to establish an invincible position: by building up a strategically advantageous position through the occupation of important areas in the South; by creating an economy that will be self-sufficient in the long run through the development of rich resources in the Southern regions, as well as through the use of the economic power of the East Asian continent; and by linking Asia and Europe in destroying the Anglo-American coalition through our cooperation with Germany and Italy. Meanwhile, we may hope that we will be able to influence the trend of affairs and bring the war to an end.⁷²

Nagano believed that,

If we take the South, we will be able to strike a strong blow against American resources of national defense. That is, we will build an iron wall, and within it we will destroy, one by one, the enemy states in Asia; and in addition, we will defeat America and Britain. If Britain is defeated, Americans will have to do some thinking. When we are asked what will happen in five years from now, it is natural that we should not know, whether it is in military operations, politics, or diplomacy.⁷³

Nagano believed Japan could convert the Southwestern Pacific into an “impregnable” bastion, “laying the basis for protracted operations” that would exhaust U.S. will.⁷⁴ Adrian Lewis believes this best explains the Japanese determination to wage a “hopeless” resistance in the Central Pacific from 1943 to 1945:

While the Marines fought some very difficult and bloody battles in places such as Tarawa and Iwo Jima, there was, in fact, *no way for them to lose*. The Japanese had no way to reinforce, no way to resupply, no way to evacuate, no way to equal the firepower of the U.S. Navy, and

frequently no air power. The Japanese literally had no way to win or survive . . . The Japanese recognized their fate. They well understood the futility of their situation. However, their objective was not to achieve victory in the traditional sense. Their objective was to inflict as many casualties as possible on American forces, to hold out as long as possible, and to prolong the war. The Japanese believed they could destroy the will of the American people.⁷⁵

Underlying the Japanese belief that they could bleed the Americans into a political settlement short of total victory—a belief that persisted among the Japanese military leadership well into 1945, was a fourth assumption: Japanese racial and spiritual superiority could neutralize America's material superiority. Japan was neither the first nor the last of America's enemies to stress the superiority of the human element of war and to underestimate the resolve of Americans at war. The Japanese were fully aware of their industrial weakness vis-à-vis the United States; they had long believed, however, that the unique qualities of their race, including a superior national will, discipline, and warfighting prowess, could defeat the strong but soft Americans. "The Japanese regarded us as a decadent nation in which pacifism and isolationism practically ruled the policy of our government," testified Ambassador Grew after the war.⁷⁶ In December 1939 Grew had warned that attempts to defeat Japan via economic sanctions ignored Japanese psychology. "Japan is a nation of hardy warriors, still inculcated with the samurai do-or-die spirit which has by tradition and inheritance become ingrained in the race." Grew went on to note that the "Japanese throughout their history have faced periodic cataclysms brought about by nature and by man: earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, epidemics,

the blighting of crops, and almost constant wars within and without the country. By long experience they are inured to hardship . . . and to regimentation."⁷⁷

H. P. Willmott points out that modern Japan was, in 1941, "a nation with no experience of defeat and, more importantly, a nation [that believed itself] created by gods, and ruled by a god. . . . This religious dimension provided the basis for the belief in the superiority of the Japanese martial commitment . . . that was the guarantee against national defeat."⁷⁸ As for America, many Japanese shared the view of Rear Admiral Tasuku Nakazawa, chief of the IJA's operations section: "a composite nation of immigrants [which] lacked unity, could not withstand adversity and privations, and regarded war as a form of sport, so that if we deal a severe blow at the outset of hostilities they would lose the will to fight."⁷⁹ Indeed, as John Dower observes, in Japanese eyes,

all Westerners were assumed to be selfish and egoistic, and incapable of mobilizing for a long fight in a distant place. All the "Western" values which Japanese ideologues and militarists had been condemning since the 1930s, after all, were attacked because they were said to sap the nation's strength and collective will. More concretely, it was assumed that Great Britain would fall to the Germans, and the United States war effort would be undercut by any number of debilitating forces endemic to contemporary America's isolationist sentiment, labor agitation, racial strife, political factionalism, capitalistic or "plutocratic" profiteering, and so on.⁸⁰

As a creature-comforted capitalist society, America was simply too soft to sustain the blood and treasure burdens of a long, harsh war, and at some point the capitalists who controlled the United States would turn against a war whose balance sheet was registering far more costs than benefits.

Japan's industrial poverty relative to that of the Soviet Union and the United States encouraged an embrace of spiritual power over material strength. Even after its punishing defeat at Nomohan, which should have alerted the IJA to the perils of warring with an industrial giant like the United States, the IJA's:

operational thinking remained essentially primitive, unscientific, complacent, narrow, and simplistic. Reaffirmation of faith in moral attributes and psychological factors amounted to callous evasion of the realities of modern firepower, mechanization, and aviation. The rationale was that the quantity and quality of the material possessed by Japan's enemies—and their sheer numbers—could only be offset by intangible factors such as high morale, spirit, and fearlessness in close fighting against men and armor. At Nomohan and throughout the Pacific War, the price was paid in lives squandered in desperate banzai charges with the bayonet, though it was well known that frontal assaults had rarely succeeded since the days of the Russo-Japanese War.⁸¹

Japanese illusions about "American decadence and effeteness and their failure to appreciate [America's] self-confidence and absolutist view of war rooted in the liberal tradition," observes Richard Betts, "facilitated the miscalculation that Washington would make the cost-benefit calculations Tokyo hoped: accept limited war and sue for peace after severe initial setbacks and the establishment of a Japanese perimeter in the Pacific that would be costly to crack."⁸²

Japanese Decisionmaking.

Scott Sagan, in his assessment of the Japanese decision for war against the United States, believes

that the “persistent theme of Japanese irrationality is highly misleading, for, using the common standard in the literature (a conscious calculation to maximize utility based on a consistent value system), the Japanese decision for war appears to have been rational.” Sagan goes on to point out that upon close examination of the decisions made in Tokyo in 1941, “one finds not a thoughtless rush to national suicide, but rather a prolonged, agonizing debate between two repugnant alternatives.”⁸³ The decisions were made by a small group of senior civilian officials and IJA and IJN officers, all of whom were committed to Japan’s continued imperial expansion, regarded the United States as the main obstacle to that expansion, and opposed making any significant concessions to the United States. The main decisionmaking venue was the Liaison Conference, of which 56 meetings pertaining to the decision for war were held from April 18 through December 4, 1941.⁸⁴ The conferences brought together representatives of the Cabinet—the prime minister, the foreign minister, the war minister (a serving IJA officer), the navy minister (a serving IJN officer), and sometimes other ministers of state—and the army and navy chiefs of staff and vice chiefs of staff. Major policy decisions reached at Liaison Conferences were forwarded to Imperial Conferences for pro forma approval by the Emperor. Attendees at an Imperial Conference, which met in the presence of the Emperor, who almost always remained silent, included members of the Liaison Conference along with the President of the Privy Council, who served as the Emperor’s spokesman.⁸⁵ It is testimony to the Emperor’s limited influence that while he was personally against war with the United States and managed to delay the decision

for war for 6 weeks, he “eventually succumbed to the persistent pressure of the military bureaucracy and accepted its argument that war with the United States was inevitable and possibly winnable.”⁸⁶

Military opinion necessarily dominated Liaison Conference discussions and decisions, given that six of the eight principals were serving officers; war minister Hideki Tojo made it seven when he became prime minister in October 1941, a position he held until 1944. The Liaison Conferences also reveal a refusal to confront openly the possibility of defeat and its probable consequences, and a pervasive fatalistic belief that Japan’s destiny was in the hands of forces beyond the control of Japanese decisionmakers.⁸⁷ There were also sharp divisions between IJA and IJN representatives over timing and methods, but they all shared the same basic values, including a belief in death before dishonor. The IJN leadership had a much greater knowledge of the United States and respect for its power than did the IJA leadership. Nagano, Yamamoto, and other senior naval officers had spent considerable time in the United States; in fact, half of all IJN officers with the rank of captain or above had served abroad, most of them in Britain or the United States.⁸⁸ In contrast, Tojo and other senior IJA officers were fixated upon the war in China and had long regarded Russia as Japan’s principal enemy. The IJA had no plans or strategy for a war against the United States and never made any real attempt to evaluate the United States as an enemy.⁸⁹ Indeed, the IJA leadership believed that war with the United States was the navy’s responsibility. “So long as the navy failed to declare unequivocally that there was no chance of victory [against the United States], the army saw no reason to concern itself with the problem.”⁹⁰ This extraordinarily

casual attitude toward the United States, an enemy for which the IJA had performed no military assessment or drafted a war plan, was the product in part of the army's utter preoccupation with its responsibilities on the Asian mainland. At the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, the army had 700,000 troops in Manchuria (for a possible invasion of Siberia) and had already sustained 180,000 dead and 425,000 wounded in the China war; only 11 of its 51 divisions were available for operations in Southeast Asia.⁹¹

Perhaps the most important conference of the year was the Imperial Conference of July 2, 1941. At this conference the Emperor sanctioned army and navy plans to acquire bases in southern French Indochina, a move which explicitly postponed consideration of war with the Soviet Union and greatly increased the risk of war with the United States.⁹² The German invasion of Russia on June 22 had persuaded Foreign Minister Yosuke Matsuoka and Privy Council President Yoshimichi Hara, among others, that Japan should strike northward, into the Soviet Far East, before moving southward into Southeast Asia. The "war between Germany and the Soviet Union represents the chance of a lifetime for Japan," argued Hara. "Since the Soviet Union is promoting Communism around the world, we will have to attack her sooner or later. . . . Our Empire wants to avoid going to war with Great Britain and the United States while we are engaged in a war with the Soviet Union. . . . [so] I want to see the Soviet Union attacked on this occasion."⁹³ Proponents of a southward advance first prevailed, however, leaving an attack on Russia for later consideration. U.S. economic sanctions were beginning to bite hard, and there was nothing to stop the Americans from imposing additional sanctions, including an oil embargo. Moreover, Japanese military

intelligence was not persuaded that Germany would swiftly defeat the Soviet Union. The conquest of Southeast Asia would afford Japan control over the oil of the Dutch East Indies as well as the tin and rubber of Malaya and southern Indochina; it would also isolate the Nationalist Government in China from any further Western assistance. The Siberian option could wait.

The policy document approved at the Imperial Conference of July 2, "Outline of National Policies in View of the Changing Situation," was quite clear on the implications for Japanese-American relations: "In order to achieve the objectives [of defeating China and securing control of Southeast Asia], preparations for war with Great Britain and the United States will be made. . . . *our Empire will not be deterred by the possibility of being involved in a war with Great Britain and the United States.*"⁹⁴ Thus the momentous decision to go south—to occupy southern Indochina as a preparatory step to a military advance into Southeast Asia—was taken *before* the Roosevelt administration's imposition of an oil embargo. Indeed, as we have seen, the embargo was a *response* to that decision. The Japanese decision to go south was made against the backdrop of escalating U.S. economic warfare against Tokyo and the legitimate Japanese fear that harsher sanctions were in the offing, though the abruptness and scope of the asset freeze still came as a shock. For Japanese leaders, many of them now persuaded that war with the United States was inevitable, the decision was an economic insurance policy against a complete shut-down of Western trade triggered by the July 26 freeze of Japanese assets in the United States.

At the Imperial Conference on September 6, both IJN Chief of Staff Nagano and IJA Chief of Staff Sugiyama conceded that a war with the United States would

likely be prolonged, but they also contended that the U.S. embargo had made war necessary, and the sooner, the better, because Japan's national defense capability was declining vis-à-vis that of the United States.⁹⁵ In a series of questions and answers prepared for the Emperor by the War and Navy ministries entitled "The Essentials for Carrying Out the Empire's Policies," the proponents of war declared that "the policies of Japan and the United States are mutually incompatible; it is historically inevitable that the conflict between the two countries . . . will ultimately lead to war." The document went on to assert that "Even if we should make concessions to the United States by giving up part of our national policy for the sake of temporary peace, the United States, its military position strengthened, is sure to demand more and more concessions on our part; and ultimately our empire will have to lie prostrate at the feet of the United States."⁹⁶ The objective of war was clear:

to expel the influence of [the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands] from East Asia, to establish a sphere for the self-defense and self-preservation of our Empire, and to build a New Order in Greater East Asia. In other words, we aim to establish a close and inseparable relationship in military, political, and economic affairs between our Empire and the countries of the Southern Region, to achieve our Empire's self-defense and self-preservation.⁹⁷

The final decisions for war were made at the Liaison Conference of November 1 and the Imperial Conference of November 5. At the Liaison Conference a deadline for military action was set at the beginning of December absent a diplomatic breakthrough by November 30.⁹⁸ This deadline was reaffirmed at the

Imperial Conference, which also established a set of Japanese negotiating demands which the Roosevelt administration could not possibly accept, thus making war truly inevitable in early December 1941. The demands included noninterference in Japan's war against China; restoration of pre-embargo trade relations; a promise to supply Japan's petroleum needs; and cooperation in obtaining assured Japanese access to the resources of the Dutch East Indies. In exchange, Japan was prepared to foreswear an armed advance into Southeast Asia, except French Indochina.⁹⁹

Planning and training for the attack on Pearl Harbor began in early 1941, when Admiral Yamamoto became commander-in-chief of Japan's Combined Fleet. The final operational plan itself was approved at the September 6 Imperial Conference, and elements of Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's Pearl Harbor strike force began departing Kure Naval Base on November 10. Ironically, given the strategic consequences of the decision for war with the United States, the attack on Pearl Harbor was much less militarily effective than it could—and should—have been. None of the U.S. Pacific Fleet's three aircraft carriers was present at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and of the eight mostly over-aged battleships at Pearl, only two (the *Arizona* and *Oklahoma*) were destroyed beyond repair; the rest were refloated, repaired, and returned to wartime service. The same was true of the three light cruisers and four destroyers damaged in the attack. All U.S. heavy cruisers and submarines, and most U.S. destroyers, escaped any damage. Moreover, most of the 155 U.S. combat aircraft destroyed in Hawaii were replaced from the United States mainland within a matter of weeks.¹⁰⁰ Worse still for the Japanese was their failure to destroy Pearl Harbor as a functioning

naval base. (The attack was directed against the fleet, not the harbor.) Shore installations, including machine shops and the tremendous oil storage facility adjacent to Pearl Harbor, were left pretty much intact, which permitted the U.S. Navy to continue to operate from Pearl Harbor. Gordon Prange believed that Nagumo's failure to "pulverize the Pearl Harbor base" and "to seek out and sink America's carriers" was Japan's "first and probably greatest strategic error of the entire Pacific conflict."¹⁰¹ The destruction of Pearl Harbor or the invasion and occupation of the Hawaiian Islands would have compelled the Navy to operate from the American West Coast, adding another 3,000 miles of distance to be surmounted before grappling with the Japanese in the Central and Southwestern Pacific. After the war, Minoru Genda, the brilliant Japanese naval aviator who planned the details of the attack on Pearl Harbor, lamented the Japanese failure to invade Hawaii, which he blamed on the IJA's preoccupation with eventual war against the Soviet Union and unwillingness to release (from Manchuria) the divisions necessary to take Hawaii. "After the attack on Pearl Harbor," he said, "we could have taken Honolulu pretty easily. This would have deprived the American Navy of its best island base in the Pacific [and] would have cut the lifeline to Australia, and that country might have fallen to us like a ripe plum."¹⁰² Japanese possession of Hawaii *and* Australia would have deprived the United States of the indispensable base from which to challenge Japanese control of Southeast Asia.

Yet Yamamoto's objective in the Pearl Harbor attack was limited: to knock out the U.S. Pacific Fleet for at least 6 months so that Japan could conquer Southeast Asia without American naval interference. Pearl Harbor was essentially a flanking raid in support of

the main event, which was Tokyo's southward move against Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies. The possibility of occupying Hawaii was never seriously considered by either Yamamoto or the IJN's general staff.

John Mueller has called the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor a "military inconvenience" for the United States and a "political and strategic disaster" for Japan because it instantly galvanized American public opinion behind a total war effort that led to Japan's destruction.¹⁰³ At one stroke, Pearl Harbor demolished powerful isolationist opposition to Roosevelt's interventionist foreign policy and ensured the eventual defeat of the Axis powers.

Failed Deterrence.

The Roosevelt administration attempted to deter Japanese expansion into Southeast Asia via three actions: (1) redeployment of most of the U.S. Fleet from southern California to Pearl Harbor in the spring of 1940; (2) imposition of economic sanctions, culminating in the oil embargo of July 1941; and (3) a last-minute attempt to strengthen U.S. military power Southeast Asia, capped by the deployment to the Philippines of new-production B-17 long-range bombers (and Britain's agreed dispatch of additional warships to the Pacific). The California-based U.S. Fleet, slated to be subdivided into the Atlantic and Pacific Fleets in February 1941, was on maneuvers in Hawaiian waters when Roosevelt ordered it to remain in Pearl Harbor, believing that its open-ended presence there could deter a potential Japanese move into Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁴ The decision to retain the fleet in Hawaii, which was strongly opposed by fleet commander Admiral J. O.

Richardson (whom Roosevelt replaced with Admiral Husband Kimmel), exposed the fleet to the very attack the Japanese launched on December 7, 1941. Intended as a deterrent, the fleet became a magnet. As Yamamoto remarked to a colleague, the “fact that [the United States] has brought a great fleet to Hawaii to show us that it’s within striking distance of Japan means, conversely, that *we’re* within striking distance too. In trying to intimidate us, America has put itself in a vulnerable position. If you ask me, they’re just that bit too confident.”¹⁰⁵

The decision to reinforce the Philippines, which reversed a policy that had written off their defense because of the long-standing judgment that the islands were certain to be quickly captured by the Japanese in the event of war, was driven by an unwarranted confidence: first, on the part of General Douglas MacArthur (recalled by Roosevelt to active duty and commander-in-chief of U.S. forces in the Far East) in the defense of the Philippines, and second, on the part of Stimson and Marshall in the deterrent value of a few dozen B-17s based in the Philippines.¹⁰⁶ The Japanese were not impressed. They attacked the Philippines a few hours after Pearl Harbor and destroyed most of the islands’ B-17 force on the ground. The hasty decision to build up U.S. forces in Southeast Asia “was a disastrous strategic miscalculation for the United States, because the belief that a scratch force of American bombers and a few British warships could be transformed into a ‘big stick’ that would force the Japanese to halt their advance southward was a gamble doomed to failure,” contends Edwin Layton. On the contrary, by “embarking on a deterrent policy before the military forces were installed in the Philippines to make it

credible, Britain and the United States succeeded in making the concept of a preemptive strike an attractive option to the Japanese."¹⁰⁷

Obviously, the United States failed to deter the Japanese, who preferred the horrendous risks of war with the United States over a humiliating retreat from empire. Those within the Roosevelt administration who believed the Japanese would not go to war with the United States were wrong. So, too, were those who believed the United States could deter a Japanese advance into Southeast Asia via such measures as a significant "forward" U.S. naval presence in Hawaii, economic sanctions, and B-17s in the Philippines. The United States sought to stop Japan without a war, but ended up provoking war. At no point in 1941 did Roosevelt threaten war; he did not want war with Japan, and he undoubtedly recognized that "[n]o unequivocal warning could be given" because he "could not be sure of American reaction in the event of actual crisis." Roosevelt was "fully aware of the need to secure congressional approval for war, the strength of isolationist sentiment in the United States, and of the difficulties [of] demonstrating that a [Japanese] attack on British and Dutch colonies [in Southeast Asia] was a direct threat American interests."¹⁰⁸

If the administration was prepared to go to war over a Japanese advance into Southeast Asia, it should have made that fact plain to Tokyo. Yet Roosevelt never did so. At the Placentia Bay Conference of August 1941, from which the Atlantic Charter was proclaimed, the British proposed identical parallel Anglo-American declarations to Tokyo, warning that "Any further encroachment by Japan in the Southwestern Pacific would produce a situation in which the United States

Government [His Majesty's Government] would be compelled to take counter measures *even though these might lead to war* between the United States, [Great Britain], and Japan."¹⁰⁹ Churchill did not believe there was much chance of stopping Japanese aggression in Southeast Asia short of a clear-cut threat of war by the United States and Great Britain, but was unprepared to issue such a threat except in conjunction with Roosevelt. But Roosevelt was unwilling to go that far. Yet it was:

never clear what progressive economic pressure and the retention of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor were supposed to do. Roosevelt did not intend these as measures preparatory for actual war; he did want them to restrain Tokyo. But if the United States meant to deter Japan from taking steps regarded as threatening, it ought to have been issuing far clearer warnings, as the amazement of Tokyo at the asset freeze attests. If Washington hoped to hinder Japan's ability to make war whether as a hedge in case conflict came or to block the conquest of the southwestern Pacific and capitulation of Chiang's regime [in China], gradual pressure was a poor road to take.¹¹⁰

A few days before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt did make a solid pledge to the British ambassador in Washington that the United States would go to war in response to a Japanese attack on British or Dutch territory in Southeast Asia, a pledge that capped increasingly firm verbal assurances beginning in July.¹¹¹ Roosevelt had believed, at least since the formation of the so-called Axis alliance (the Tripartite Pact), that Japan and Germany were closely coordinating their agendas of aggression. (They were not. The Germans did not inform the Japanese of their planned attack on the Soviet Union, with which Japan

had recently signed a nonaggression pact, and the Japanese did not alert the Germans to their planned attack on Pearl Harbor.) Roosevelt also believed that the survival of Britain's empire in Asia was essential to Britain's ability to continue fighting Germany and Italy in Europe. Yet he never indicated to anyone, including the British ambassador, how he thought he could obtain a declaration of war against Japan in response to a Japanese advance into Southeast Asia limited to European colonies. What if the Japanese had attacked only Malaya, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies, leaving the Philippines and Hawaii alone? Could Roosevelt have persuaded Congress to go to war on behalf of European colonies in Asia? (On August 12, the House of Representatives had voted to extend the Selective Service Act by a single vote; but for that one vote, the U.S. Army would have largely disintegrated.) Roosevelt speechwriter Robert Sherwood, who believed that Roosevelt and General George Marshall "were far more afraid of the isolationists at home . . . than they were of the enemies abroad,"¹¹² described Roosevelt's dilemma in his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins:

The Japanese were about to strike at British or Dutch possessions or both—and what could we do about it? The British and the Dutch were hopelessly unable to defend themselves and so were the exposed Dominions of Australia and New Zealand. . . . Without formidable American intervention, the Japanese would be able to conquer and exploit an empire, rich in resources, stretching from the Aleutian Islands to India or even to the Middle East; and it was idle to assume, and Roosevelt knew it better than anyone else, that there could be any formidable American intervention without the full, final, irrevocable plunging of the entire nation into war. And what were the chances of that [if the Japanese

struck only the British and the Dutch]? What would the President have to say to the Congress in that event? . . . Why . . . should Americans die for . . . such outposts of British imperialism as Singapore or Hong Kong or of Dutch imperialism in the East Indies?¹¹³

Hopkins recalled several talks with Roosevelt during the year before Pearl Harbor in which Roosevelt expressed concern that “the tactics of the Japanese would be to avoid conflict with us; that they would not attack either the Philippines or Hawaii but would move on Thailand, French Indo-China, [and] make further inroads on China itself and attack the Malay Straits.” Hopkins then recalled Roosevelt’s subsequent “relief” that the Japanese had attacked U.S. territory. “In spite of the disaster at Pearl Harbor and the blitz-warfare with the Japanese during the first few weeks, it completely solidified the American people and made the war upon Japan inevitable.”¹¹⁴

A Japanese attack on *American* territory somewhere in the Pacific was the only event that could elicit a congressional declaration of war, and Roosevelt, unlike later presidents, respected the Congress’s constitutional prerogative to declare war. It was also necessary that the attack appear unprovoked to the American people. Stimson testified in 1946 that such an attack was necessary to unite the country behind any war with Japan. Even though by late November 1941 the administration knew that a Japanese attack was coming (a “war warning” was issued on November 27 to all U.S. Army and Navy commanders), and “[i]n spite of the risk involved . . . in letting the Japanese fire the first shot,” said Stimson, “we realized that in order to have the full support of the American people it was desirable to make sure that the Japanese be the ones to do this so that there should remain no doubt in anyone’s mind as to who were the aggressors.”¹¹⁵

Luckily for the Roosevelt administration, the Japanese obliged. Japanese leaders had come to regard war with the United States as both inevitable and – after the imposition of the oil embargo – urgent, and they seemed completely oblivious to the domestic political difficulties they might have caused Roosevelt by confining their attacks in Southeast Asia to British and Dutch possessions. The IJN in particular insisted that the United States and Great Britain were strategically inseparable (mirroring Roosevelt’s view of Germany and Japan) and that an attack on the British and the Dutch in Southeast Asia was sure to provoke a violent U.S. response, and therefore that it was imperative to preempt the United States militarily.

Unluckily for the administration, war with Japan might well have been avoided but for an unwillingness – in an age of Western territorial empires – to accept the legitimacy of any Japanese imperial ambitions in East Asia (outside Korea), and but for a failure to appreciate Tokyo’s probable response to economic sanctions that threatened to eliminate Japan as a respectable industrial and military power. A refusal to accept some measure of Japanese hegemony in Manchuria and North China (as the Japanese accepted America’s self-proclaimed hegemony in the Western Hemisphere) precluded a negotiated settlement that might have enabled the Roosevelt administration to concentrate U.S. attention and resources on the Nazi German threat in Europe that it rightly regarded as far more dangerous than Japanese aggression in East Asia. And by airily jerking its lethal economic leash around Japan’s neck to punish Tokyo for aggression that Washington was never prepared to resist by force, or even threatened force, the Roosevelt administration invited the very war in the Far East it sought to avoid.

"Instead of complementing his Europe-first strategy and orientation, the oil embargo threatened to disorient and distract [Roosevelt] from what he conceived to be his primary task by forcing Japan to consider war," conclude David Klein and Hilary Conroy.¹¹⁶ Roland Worth, Jr., contends that "the U.S. decision to embargo 90 percent of Japan's petroleum and two-thirds of its trade led directly to the attack on Pearl Harbor." Although "striking at the economic Achilles Heel of Japan was naturally appealing in light of its economy's comparative weakness, it only made sense if one were genuinely ready to negotiate a mutually acceptable compromise (which meant leaving Japan a good part of its empire) or if one were willing to risk the military retaliation that Japan . . . was quite capable of inflicting."¹¹⁷ Bruce Russett agrees: "The Japanese attack would not have come but for the . . . embargo on the shipment of strategic materials to Japan. . . . Either raw material supplies had to be restored by a peaceful settlement with the Western powers, or access to the resources in Thailand, Malaya, and the Indies would have to be secured by force while Japan still retained the capabilities to do so."¹¹⁸ The late historian John Toland, in his best-selling *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire*, concluded that:

America made a grave diplomatic blunder by allowing an issue not vital to her basic interests—the welfare of China—to become, at the last moment, the keystone of her foreign policy. Until that summer [of 1941] America had two limited objectives in the Far East: to drive a wedge between Japan and Hitler, and to thwart Japan's southward thrust. She could easily have obtained both these objectives but instead made an issue out of no issue at all, the Tripartite Pact, and insisted on the liberation of China. . . . America could not throw the weight of her strength against Japan to liberate China, nor had she ever

intended to. Her major enemy was Hitler. [The Pacific War was] a war that need not have been fought.¹¹⁹

Coercive diplomacy requires carrots as well as sticks, but the United States was never prepared to make any concessions to Japan, not even a temporary *modus vivendi*—for example, a return to the *status quo ante* before Japan's move into southern Indochina and the U.S. imposition of the oil embargo. Such a deal was actually proposed in late 1941 by Admiral Kichisaburo Nomura, Japan's ambassador to the United States and a staunch opponent of war with America, and endorsed by Marshall and Stark as a means of affording the United States more time to strengthen U.S. defenses in the Pacific.¹²⁰ In the absence of any attempt to conciliate Japan on crucial issues, U.S. coercive diplomacy was doomed to fail. George C. Herring, in his majestic history of American foreign policy, concludes that:

Had the [United States] abandoned, at least temporarily, its determination to drive the Japanese from China and restored some trade, it might have delayed a two-front war when it was not yet ready to fight one major enemy. Having already learned what seemed the hard lessons of appeasement [in Europe], U.S. officials rejected a course of expediency. Rather, they backed a proud nation into a position where its only choices were war or surrender.¹²¹

Conclusions.

Japan's imperial ambitions in East Asia inexorably collided with Western interests in the region, and Japan's alliance with Nazi Germany, though of little operational significance, further alienated the Western powers. The Pacific War arose out of Japan's aggression in Southeast Asia, which was presaged by its occupation of southern Indochina in July 1941.

Had Tokyo confined its aggression to Northeast Asia, it almost certainly could have avoided war with Britain and the United States, neither of which was prepared to go to war over China. The U.S. insistence, after Japanese forces moved into southern Indochina, that Japan evacuate *China* as well as Indochina, as a condition for the restoration of trade relations, thus made no sense as a means of dissuading the Japanese from moving south. On the contrary, the demand that Japan quit China killed any prospect of a negotiated alternative to Japan's conquest of Southeast Asia (e.g., restored trade in exchange for Japan's withdrawal from Indochina). In effect, *the United States went to war over China rather than Southeast Asia*—a volte-face of enormous strategic consequence since it propelled the United States into a war with Japan over a remote country for which the United States had never been prepared to fight. The fate of China, even of Southeast Asia, did not engage core U.S. security interests, especially at a time when Europe's fate hung in the balance. A war with Japan was, of course, a war the United States was always going to win, but Japan was not the enemy the Roosevelt administration wanted to fight. The United States could have settled its accounts with Japan after Hitler's defeat had been assured. Was denying Japan an expanded empire in Southeast Asia more important, in 1941, than defeating Hitler?

The roots of Japan's decision for war with the United States were economic and reputational. The termination of U.S. trade with Japan that followed Roosevelt's freezing of Japanese assets in July 1941 threatened to destroy Japan economically and militarily. A small, resource-poor, and overpopulated island state, Japan in the 1930s sought economic self-sufficiency and great power status via the acquisition of empire—just as Great

Britain had done. (The United States could preach about the evils of imperialism and “spheres of influence” because, as a huge, resource-rich, continental state, it had no need for an overseas colonial empire; nor was its hegemony in the Western Hemisphere effectively challenged by other great powers. Indeed, the Japanese viewed the Monroe Doctrine as justification for their imperial ambitions.) Kenneth Pyle, in his masterful assessment of modern Japan’s behavior in the evolving international system, identifies “a persistent obsession with status and prestige — or, to put it in terms Japanese would more readily recognize, rank and honor.”¹²² From the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, “Japan strove and struggled for status as a great power. Other countries in Asia were aware of their backwardness, but nowhere else was this awareness so intense and so paramount that it drove a people with such single-minded determination. It became a national obsession to be the equal of the world’s great powers.”¹²³ A fusion of state-centered honor and popular nationalism occurred in Japan that prompted “an instinctive need for recognition of its status in the hierarchy of nations, and the values of hierarchy provided a behavioral norm that focused and intensified the realist drive for national power. Establishment of Japan’s honor, of its reputation for power in relation to other nations, became a goal sanctioned by inherited values and norms.”¹²⁴

Yet the end result of this drive for power, honor, and reputation was Japan’s complete destruction and subsequent occupation by the United States. There can be no justification for a foreign policy that consciously propels a state into a war against an inherently undefeatable enemy. By the late 1930s, a fatal abyss had opened between Japan’s imperial ambitions and

its material capacity to fulfill them. Japan simply did not have the resources to police Korea and Manchuria, conquer China, invade Southeast Asia, and defeat the United States in the Pacific. Japan lacked the necessary industrial strength, and what modest manufacturing base it did possess critically depended on imported oil and other commodities from the United States. Indeed, Japan's expanding war on the Asian mainland made it more dependent on imported U.S. commodities and finished goods. Japanese leaders refused to recognize the limits of Japan's power, despite the warnings of Nomohan and a continuing war in China they could never bring to a satisfactory conclusion. The very fact that Japanese leaders would consider sequential wars with the United States and the Soviet Union at a time when Japan was already militarily overstretched in China testifies to a fatal blindness to the strategic necessity of maintaining some reasonable harmony between political ambitions and military capacity. Like the Germans in both world wars, the Japanese seemed to believe that superior prowess at the operational level of war could and would – somehow – redeem reckless strategic decisions.¹²⁵ And again like the Germans, the Japanese, in the celebration of their own nationalism, were utterly insensitive to the nationalism of others.

Honor may have dictated the Japanese decision for war in 1941, but “suicide before dishonor” was a policy choice the Japanese might have avoided had Tokyo been willing and able to temper its imperial ambitions and accept some measure of economic dependence on the United States. For Japan, the prosperous and relatively democratic 1920s and the postwar decades as an economic powerhouse and ally of the United States demonstrate 20th-century possibilities other than the path of autarky through aggression. The 1930s and 1940s were a tragic and – for Japan's victims –

murderous detour from what might have been—and later was. For Japan in the 20th century, good relations with the United States were always a prerequisite for a secure Japan, whereas war with the United States was always going to be a disaster.

Still, it cannot be denied that, in threatening Japan's economic destruction (and consequent military impoverishment), the United States placed the Japanese in a position in which the only choices open to them were war or subservience. "Never inflict upon another major military power a policy which would cause you yourself to go to war unless you are fully prepared to engage that power militarily," cautions Roland Worth, Jr., in his *No Choice But War: The United States Embargo against Japan and the Eruption of War in the Pacific*. "And don't be surprised that if they do decide to retaliate, that they seek out a time and a place that inflicts maximum harm and humiliation upon your cause."¹²⁶ Roosevelt called the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor "unprovoked." Was it?

Lessons for Today.

The Japanese-American interaction of 1941 that led to war yields several enduring lessons of particular relevance to today's national security decisionmakers. First, *fear and honor, "rational" or not, can motivate as much as interest*. The "realist" explanation of international politics as the struggle for power among calculating, self-interested states discounts fright, ideology, and pride as motivators of state behavior. Thucydides wrote that it was "the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, that made war inevitable" between the two city states.¹²⁷ Clearly, it was the alarm inspired in Tokyo by the U.S. oil

embargo—and the absence of an honorable alternative to war—that made the Pacific War inevitable. Frightened national leaderships can behave recklessly, as can leaderships in the grip of powerful political or racial ideologies. The George W. Bush administration arguably overreacted to the horror of the September 11, 2001 (9/11) al-Qaeda terrorist attacks by invading and occupying Iraq, a country that had no link to the attacks, and it was Hitler’s racial beliefs that propelled Nazi Germany into its fatal invasion of the Soviet Union. Honor can be no less a motivator—witness not only Japan’s decision for war against the United States in 1941 but also Churchill’s decision the year before to fight on after Dunkirk. France waged two fruitless wars in Indochina and Algeria because French leaders believed loss of empire would diminish France’s prestige as a world power. For reasons of honor, the American Confederacy, like the Japanese in World War II, fought on long after any reasonable hope of victory had vanished. Gordon Prange observed that the “Americans assumed, correctly, that Japan could not win a sustained war against the United States. What they failed to consider was one of the lessons of history: A so-called ‘have-not’ nation may well be possessed of a will and skill far out of proportion to her resources. A later generation of Americans learned this the hard way in Vietnam where, lacking the will to win, the U.S. suffered a humiliating defeat.”¹²⁸

Second, *there is no substitute for knowledge of a potential adversary’s history and culture.* Mutual cultural ignorance was a major factor contributing to the outbreak of war in 1941. With some notable exceptions like Ambassador Grew, American foreign policymakers knew little or nothing about Japan or the Japanese. On the Japanese side, there were some, like

Admiral Yamamoto, who knew the United States well and respected American power and nationalism, but most Japanese leaders, especially senior IJA officers, knew little or nothing about America and Americans. Racial stereotypes prevailed on both sides, with the Americans, who had a long history of discrimination against racial minorities, including Japanese, believing the Japanese were a little yellow people incapable of waging war effectively against a modern Western power like the United States; and with the Japanese, who also regarded themselves as racially superior to their enemies, especially the Chinese, believing that the Americans were too materialistic and individualistic to muster the national discipline necessary for a long and bloody war. The Japanese were oblivious to the galvanizing effect their attack on Pearl Harbor was certain to have on American public opinion.

Cultural ignorance continues to plague U.S. foreign policy. Americans proved to be as culturally ignorant of Vietnam and Iraq as they were of Japan, and it is testimony to that ignorance that the United States is probably the only modern country in the world where a person who speaks no foreign language can yet be considered well-educated. The United States came to grief in Vietnam and Iraq because of a lack of knowledge of the two countries “best described as comprehensive and spectacular,” observes Dennis Showalter.¹²⁹ Colin Gray convincingly argues that America’s “strategic performance” is still hampered by cultural insensitivity.

Bear in mind American public ideology, with its emphasis on political and moral uniqueness, manifest destiny, divine mission even, married to the multidimensional sense of national greatness. Such self-evaluation has not inclined Americans to be respectful of the beliefs, habits,

and behaviors of other cultures. This has been, and continues to be, especially unfortunate in the inexorably competitive field of warfare. From the Indian Wars on the internal frontier to Iraq and Afghanistan today, the American way of war has suffered from the self-inflicted damage caused by failure to understand the enemy of the day. For a state that now accepts, indeed insists upon, a global mandate to act as sheriff, this lack of cultural empathy, including a lack of sufficiently critical self-knowledge, is most serious.¹³⁰

Third, *deterrence lies in the mind of the deterree, not the deterrer*. To be effective, threatened force has to be credible to the enemy—i.e., the enemy has to believe that you have both the capacity and the will to what you threaten to do, and that what you threaten to do is unacceptable. The Roosevelt administration attempted to deter a Japanese military advance into Southeast Asia via an open-ended deployment of powerful U.S. naval forces to Hawaii, imposition of escalating economic sanctions, and a military buildup in the Philippines. Key members of the administration assumed that the Japanese could be deterred because—surely—Tokyo knew it could not win a war with the United States. But at no point along the road to Pearl Harbor did the administration clearly threaten war; nor did it understand, until it was too late, that Tokyo preferred the risk of a lost war to a shameful peace. Though the imposition of the oil embargo was clearly unacceptable to the Japanese, they opted for war rather than submission. They were provoked, not deterred.

America's crushing latent military superiority over Japan actually encouraged war because it made the passage of time a deadly enemy. Small though the possibilities of even a limited victory were in 1941, they would soon vanish altogether as the United States

rearmed. Because the military balance was shifting irreversibly against Japan, Tokyo believed it had to initiate war as soon as possible to have a fighting chance.

Fourth, *strategy must always inform and guide operations*. The Japanese never had a coherent strategy for achieving their myriad objectives in China and Southeast Asia. This absence of strategy was attributable in part to the unbridgeable gap between Tokyo's ambitions in East Asia and its available military resources, and in part to the Japanese military's focus on the operational level of war. The attack on Pearl Harbor was a crap shoot, a reckless roll of the dice with profound consequences which the Japanese never fully grasped because Tokyo never had a strategy for defeating the United States. The Japanese never had a clear or convincing picture of how a war with the United States might end; they seemed to believe, or at least hope, that early operational successes would somehow deliver ultimate strategic success.

One is reminded of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, especially the prewar lack of postwar planning and the mismatch between the amount of force employed and the war's objective of Iraq's political reconstruction. War planning focused almost exclusively on the destruction of the old regime through a rapid conventional military campaign that would validate the effectiveness of "transformed" U.S. military forces. The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) sought a quick military victory and was oblivious to the potential force requirements for stabilizing post-Saddam Iraq. The apparent assumptions, at least among OSD's neoconservatives, were that Americans would be welcomed as liberators and that a stable democracy would naturally arise in Iraq once tyranny had been removed.

Fifth, *economic sanctioning can be tantamount to an act of war*. The economic sanctions the United States imposed on Japan in 1941 were probably the most ruinous of any in history short of wartime naval blockades. They were so destructive that the Japanese concluded they had no recourse but war. The damage that economic sanctions can inflict upon a state that is highly dependent on international trade can be equivalent to, if less dramatic than, an armed attack; as such, they can provoke a violent reaction. The common view of economic sanctioning as an alternative to war needs to be reassessed, especially by the United States, which routinely sanctions regimes it does not like. Sanctioning is an inherently hostile act intended to coerce the sanctioned state to alter its behavior in some very important way, and today some states, like Iran, have means of responding that avoid militarily challenging the United States head-on.

Sixth, *the presumption of moral or spiritual superiority can fatally discount the consequences of an enemy's material superiority*. Clausewitz was right: the best strategy is to be strong. The Japanese were hardly the last of America's enemies to believe that a superior willingness to fight and die could neutralize or even defeat U.S. advantages in firepower and technology. Mao Tse-tung convinced himself that the superior motivation and tactics of the People's Liberation Army could drive the Americans out of Korea, and other enemies, including Saddam Hussein (during the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990-91) and Osama bin Laden, believed that the U.S. defeat in Vietnam and humiliation in Lebanon revealed an aversion to incurring casualties that could be decisively exploited. Facing a much stronger enemy can compel a belief in the offsetting superiority of one's own cause, race, or strategy and tactics. Indeed, irregular warfare offers the militarily weak perhaps

the only chance of defeating the militarily strong, although most insurgencies fail precisely because they are simply too weak to win without ultimately developing a capacity for regular warfare. Mao Tse-tung himself regarded guerrilla warfare as a transition and complement to regular warfare. "The concept that guerrilla warfare is an end in itself and that guerrilla activities can be divorced from those of the regular forces is incorrect," he wrote in 1937. "[T]here can be no doubt that our regular forces are of primary importance, because it is they who are alone capable of producing the decision. Guerrilla warfare assists them in producing this favorable decision."¹³¹ Mao had great respect for the conventional military superiority of his enemies, as did the Vietnamese Communists for that of the French and the Americans. The Vietnamese Communists employed regular military forces, not guerrillas, to defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and to overrun South Vietnam in 1975.

Seventh, *"inevitable" war easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy*. A war becomes inevitable when at least one side comes to believe it. Japan squandered a potentially decisive opportunity to avoid war with the United States by attacking only Europe's colonial possessions in Southeast Asia. Absent the attacks on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, Roosevelt would have found it extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible, to carry the American electorate into war with Japan, and the Japanese would have gone on to secure the resources of the rest of Southeast Asia without arousing the armed wrath of the United States. By late summer of 1941, however, most Japanese leaders had come to regard war with the United States as unavoidable—and so it became as the Japanese moved to initiate it under the most favorable possible operational circumstances.

The assumption of inevitability encourages, even mandates, exploiting the temporal opportunities of striking first, especially if the military balance with the enemy is shifting in his favor. Preventive war, which is not to be confused with preemptive military action to defeat a certain and imminent attack, rests upon the assumptions of inevitability and unfavorable strategic trends. The claim of inevitability also can be used to excuse or justify outright aggression. The George W. Bush administration believed, or at least publicly argued, that war with Saddam Hussein's regime was inevitable and that it was imperative to start that war before the Iraqi dictator acquired nuclear weapons. Unlike the Roosevelt administration, which mistakenly assumed that Japan was deterrable, the Bush administration assumed, or at least asserted, that a nuclear-armed Saddam Hussein would be undeterrable. It remains unclear whether proponents of war with Iraq really believed that war was inevitable and that Saddam was undeterrable; there was no persuasive prewar evidence that Iraq had a viable nuclear weapons program, but substantial evidence existed that Saddam was effectively deterred, and would have remained deterred, from using any weapon of mass destruction against the United States or U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf region.¹³² What is clear is that the moral, strategic, and financial costs of the U.S. preventive war against Iraq have—so far—greatly exceeded the benefits claimed before the war by the Bush administration and its neoconservative supporters.

The American experience in Iraq should serve as a warning to those who believe the United States should use force, if necessary, to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Some of the same neoconservative pundits and like-minded politicians who called for

preventive war against Iraq are now calling for war against Iran on the same discredited grounds that a nuclear-armed Iran would be undeterrable and that a war with that country, or at least its governing regime, is inevitable, and that it is better to have it before rather than after Teheran “goes nuclear.” Yet short of an invasion and occupation of Iran, for which the United States simply lacks the necessary force (and political will), no military strike, even one based on exquisite intelligence, could promise anything other than a retardation of Iran’s drive to acquire nuclear weapons. (The relevant lesson here is the 1981 Israeli air attack on Iraq’s nuclear facility at Osirak, which simply reinforced Saddam’s nuclear weapons ambitions and drove the Iraqi program literally underground.) Nor, despite the rantings of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is there any convincing evidence that a nuclear-armed Iran would be undeterrable; Ahmadinejad is not the Iranian government’s primary decisionmaker, and the evidence strongly suggests that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons for purposes of deterrence and prestige, not aggression.¹³³ Moreover, Iran, unlike Iraq in 2003, is not helpless; it could retaliate against U.S. forces in Iraq and oil tanker traffic in the Persian Gulf and foment terrorist attacks against American targets throughout the Middle East. The negative consequences of a U.S. (or Israeli) strike against Iran, which almost certainly would strengthen the current regime’s political grip on the country, would likely far outweigh any short-term benefits.¹³⁴

Surely, the United States is not condemned to repeat in Iran its preventive war debacle in Iraq.

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